Master Farmer Awards by Prairie Farmer Magazine

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As settlers moved west from the East Coast into Indiana and Illinois, they soon discovered that farming the vast Midwestern prairies required techniques different from those used in the East. To help educate these pioneer farmers and share practical information, Prairie Farmer magazine was founded in 1841. The magazine is still published today and remains a respected source of agricultural information for Illinois farmers.

In 1925, one of the magazine's editors, Clifford Gregory, proposed creating the annual Master Farmer Awards to recognize outstanding farmers. Recipients were selected not simply because they raised good crops, but because they excelled in crop and livestock production, farm management, community leadership, church and civic activities, and raising outstanding families.

Mr. Gregory argued that the farmer deserves public recognition. "The man who makes an outstanding success on the farm, and who at the same time is a good citizen of his community and a good husband and father, deserves as much public recognition as a man who makes an outstanding success in business, in his profession or in politics. The finest type of American citizenship is to be found on the farms of the Middle West."

Each December, the annual winners were announced and invited to Chicago, where they were honored at a banquet and presented with a gold medal. Prairie Farmer then published a feature article highlighting the life and accomplishments of each Master Farmer.

In early December of 1925, the magazine announced the first 23 Master Farmers. Twenty were from Illinois, two from Indiana, and one from Wisconsin. Two of the 23 Gold Medal winners were from Livingston County. John C. Mies lived in Fairbury, and John B. Eyman lived in Pontiac.

The Pantagraph reported that the reception was held on a Wednesday night at the Hotel Sherman in Chicago. The title was bestowed by Prairie Farmer magazine in recognition of those men who met the scorecard standard of qualifications it set. To reach this standard, they had to be outstanding successes as farmers, as citizens of their communities, and as husbands and fathers.

Dinner and fine entertainment were provided. Former Governor Frank O. Lowden made the principal address. In awarding the medals, the men were marked on definite points in organization and operation of their farms, business methods and ability, general farm appearance and upkeep, as well as home life and citizenship.

Shortly after receiving the Master Farmer award, John Mies was honored at a corn meeting in Fairbury. The February 9, 1926, Pantagraph reported that the meeting was held at Fairbury Township High School, where Clifford V. Gregory, editor of Prairie Farmer, was the featured speaker. In addition to honoring Mr. Mies, the corn surplus problem was discussed.

John C. Mies was born in 1872 in Saunemin, a son of Joseph and Elizabeth (Enebach) Mies. He attended Dixon College at Dixon and Valparaiso University. He was married to Adaline Lyons at Odell

on November 27, 1901. Mr. Mies was one of the organizers and the first president of the Livingston County Soil and Crop Improvement Association, which became the Livingston County Farm Bureau.

He was president of Farmers State Bank at Fairbury from 1914 to 1933, secretary of the Farmers Grain Elevator at Fairbury, Avoca town clerk, and director of the Avoca school. Early in his life, he taught in the county's country schools. He farmed in Iowa for five years and in Avoca township for 43 years, retiring in 1949. He received the Prairie Farmer award as a Master Farmer in 1927. He was a contributing editor to the Prairie Farmer and the Wallace Farmer, and he did some speaking on radio station WLS.

The Great Depression is generally considered to have begun with the stock market crash in October 1929. This financial calamity resulted in a 25% unemployment rate and lasted for about 12 years until the start of World War II in 1941.

During the Great Depression, millions of farmers went bankrupt and lost their farms. During the 1930s, Prairie Farmer suspended the Master Farmer award program in 1934 because of the severe economic hardship facing American agriculture. The magazine explained its decision by saying, "Citation for excellence would have seemed ironic when the farmer's principal concern was survival." Unfortunately, no complete list of award winners from 1925 to the program's suspension has been located.

The magazine resumed the Master Farmer award in 1968. Excellent records exist detailing all winners by year from 1968 to 2023. The award program remains active in 2026. Unfortunately, the list of annual winners includes the farmer's name but not the location of their farm.

At this time, the only Fairbury-area farmers identified on the modern list are Ray Hankes and Stanley Blunier. Ray Hankes received the Master Farmer award in 1994 and was a hog farmer in Fairbury. Stanley Blunier received the Master Farmer award in 2004. Stanley is a past President of the Livingston County Farm Bureau and farms near Forrest. Hopefully, further research will identify additional Fairbury-area farmers who have received this prestigious award.

In 1900, nearly 40 percent of Americans lived on farms. As farming became increasingly mechanized and productive, that percentage steadily declined. Today, less than 2% of Americans live on farms. Yet, U.S. farmers produce enough food not only to feed our nation but also to export billions of dollars' worth of agricultural products worldwide. The Master Farmer award program remains a fitting way to recognize some of our nation's most outstanding farmers.

America's Oldest Farm Paper—Founded in 1841

CLIFFORD V. GREGORY, *Editor*

The Prairie Farmer

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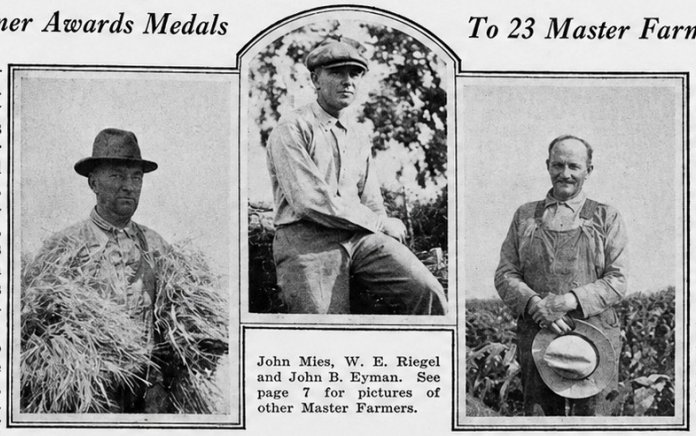
Good Farmers, Good Neighbors, Good Citizens

Prairie Farmer Awards Medals To 23 Master Farmers

A CLASSIC of American agriculture. That is the way PRAIRIE FARMER'S Master Farmer awards appealed to farm leaders, agricultural college men, railroad presidents, bankers and industrial leaders who attended the dinner in honor of the 23 Master Farmers of the Middle West at the Sherman Hotel, Chicago, Dec. 2.



John Mies, W. E. Riegel and John B. Eyman. See page 7 for pictures of other Master Farmers.

Twenty of the 23 farmers to whom awards were made were present to receive their medals, which were presented by Burridge D. Butler, publisher of PRAIRIE FARMER. "I consider it a personal honor to have the privilege of presenting these tokens to men who are leading the way to better farming and happier farm living," Mr. Butler said.

Lowden Principal Speaker

Principal speaker at the dinner was Frank O. Lowden, former governor of Illinois. "Agriculture is the basic industry of the nation," Governor Lowden said. "Yet we have failed to recognize the men who choose to stay on the farm, and who make a notable success there. A nation that honors its captains of industry and finance, its scientists and its inventors, and fails to honor its soldiers of the plow, is overlooking the very foundation of its greatness."

Governor Lowden's address was broadcast by WLS, Chicago, and was heard by thousands of the folks back home.

"I want to tell the folks at St. Anne how I'm enjoying this," said A. J. Paliissard of Kankakee county, Ill.

"I wish Mrs, Homfeld could see me now," said Fred W. Homfeld of Porter county, Ind.

"You folks back home ought to see me up here with the highbrows", said W. O. Kunkel of Hancock county, Ill.

"The credit for anything I have done does not belong to me", said Carle C. Walker of De Witt county, Ill., "but to my good neighbors who have been of so much help to me."

"This is an inspiration to me to try to be a better farmer and a better citizen," said Glenn Craft of Kane county, Ill.

"The receipt of this honor makes it necessary for all of us to do a still better job of efficient farming," said W. E. Riegel of Champaign county.